

Crash Landing by Luddleston

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Summary:

The first step of meeting new Warden recruits is not to get attached.

Alistair fails step one.

What follows? Strange companions, shared nightmares, confessing secrets, magical shenanigans, awful puns, red roses, and most dangerous of all: feelings. Actually, most dangerous of all: dragons.

Crash Landing

Author's Note:

I like my Amell too much, so here's a long-ass fic introducing you all to her! I did not intend for this to get this long OR this explicit, but alas, I was having a good time and Alistair is horny.

This follows the first part of my current (and first) playthrough of Origins, which goes from Lothering>Redcliffe>Denerim>Haven. Mostly canon compliant, although some of the romance scenes have been moved indoors, rather than them getting it on where the Maker and everyone can see.

Anyway I hope you like George!

It takes Alistair a while to start getting curious about the newest recruit Duncan's brought along.

Part of his disinterest is purposeful—it doesn't do to get attached to them before their Joining—and part of it is circumstantial. They're standing at the precipice of a major battle, and Alistair is preoccupied with how he just *knows* Duncan isn't going to put him on the front lines.

But it's hard not to be intrigued by her. She watches one man drink of the chalice and die, one man lose himself to fear in the aftermath and have to be put down, and then takes the chalice and gives them a stern, stone-cold stare as she drinks. Even Alistair feels a little sick after watching Duncan mournfully yet unflinchingly bleed a man. Alistair's retroactively glad that at his own Joining, he went first and was unconscious for the rest of it. After she swallows, she's not doing whatever the first one did, although she does pass out almost immediately.

Maybe it's just wishful thinking but he's sure she's going to be fine.

Still, he doesn't let himself get attached 'til she wakes up. Better that way.

Her name is Georgiana Amell, which Alistair learns when Duncan welcomes her to the Wardens. She introduced herself as something else, but he can't remember what that was until he tries her full name.

"Georgie," she corrects him, "or George. Anything else, and I'll set your arse on fire."

Somehow, he gets the idea she didn't give Duncan a similar warning, because there's no way anybody would tell Duncan they'd set his arse on fire. He asks Duncan about this, that night at the campfire, and Duncan tells him she asked *him* nicely.

Her family, Alistair also learns, is minor nobility in Kirkwall, of all places. But that doesn't mean she's a lady. Well. She's not a *Lady*, but she is a lady, he supposes. She's not Lady Georgiana Amell because she's a mage, and she'd not come from some estate in the Free Marches, she'd come from the Circle.

Where she came from doesn't matter to him for a long while. First, it's hard to care because they need to focus on the battle at hand. Then it's hard to care because the whole world falls down around them, and Alistair loses his mentor, a great deal of friends, and a battle while unconscious at the top of a tower. Not to mention a half-brother, even if Alistair tends to forget he ever had one and he's only spoken to him the once.

It's not like he thinks of the *king* as being his half-brother.

Then, it's hard to care because they've been rescued by *witches*.

He only realizes his new companion (is she his *trainee*— she can't be, what's he going to train her in?) being from the Circle makes any difference when they're entering Lothering and she asks him where Redcliffe is from here. Not because she doesn't know where Redcliffe is, she explains, she could point to it on a map, but because she actually has no idea where they

are at present, how far they are from anything, and what they'd need to travel such a distance.

Morrigan isn't much better. She just snootily says she'd turn into a bird if she wanted to travel. First off: creepy. Now this means any bird he sees could possibly be Morrigan watching him in disguise. Secondly: doesn't do much good for the rest of them, does it?

Georgie is looking at Morrigan like she's envious of the bird transformation skills, which Alistair really doesn't need. Georgie is much nicer than Morrigan, and listens to Alistair, possibly even *respects* him, but he still doesn't need two transforming witches. Georgie's not a witch, though. She's just a mage.

Alistair puts himself in charge of directions and Georgie puts herself in charge of talking to every single person in town, apparently. She's going about it with obvious glee, and when she notices Alistair looking at her askance, she says, "I was locked in a *tower* since I was *seven*. I never get to meet people."

It does sort of explain a lot about her, just as Alistair assumes his own past explains a lot about him.

The biggest building in Lothering is the chantry, and since the Bann's army went to Ostagar (and has likely since been demolished) that means keeping the peace is falling to the templars. Alistair would hate to be in their position, but then again, he sort of is, isn't he? Sudden promotion due to everybody else perishing beneath the blades of the darkspawn? Sounds like his life.

Georgie approaches a few templars for information, but it's only once they're in the chantry that Alistair realizes how overly aware of them she is. It isn't as if she jumps like a startled rabbit at the sight of them, but she does turn her head with every clank of heavy armor.

When they camp that night, now with two new companions, one of whom Alistair is terrified of and the other of whom is a Qunari, Georgie asks him about being a templar. After what he saw today, he's not surprised she

remembered that from their early conversations. He tells her, and she listens, but she looks at the work in her hands as she does.

She's holding a knife and a chunk of wood, but instead of whittling, she's just shaving pieces off it and then catching them in little bits of summoned flame, letting them burn up midair. They bloom into little balls of fire like the red rose Alistair picked off a bush in some Lothing garden earlier, but they fade even quicker than its petals do, turning to ash and falling at her feet in seconds. It's a methodical motion, like she needs something to do with her hands. He understands; he's been plucking fat blades of grass and then splitting them in half longwise with his thumbnail for no reason but the same.

"You don't really like templars, do you?" he says, after a lull.

"Does any prisoner like their jailers?" Her face is lit by another wisp of flame. "Well. Maybe not 'jailers'. That's... uncharitable, probably. Most of them were no more than stone statues, if you weren't acting out. And most apprentices stop trying to escape while they're still kids, so the templars can't be too hard on us."

Alistair can feel himself cringing, and he hopes she's not looking at him. Her attention seems to be on the sparks she's conjuring up. "The majority of templars don't really... you know, they're not attached to Circles. Just chantries. They hardly see mages."

"What are they, then, just a city guardsman with extra-shiny armor?"

"And a flaming sword on." He laughs. "Can't forget about the flaming sword."

Now she *is* looking at him. Her eyes are almost black, and they glitter in the firelight. "I mean it—what do templars do outside the Circle?"

She genuinely doesn't know.

"Oh. It's like you said, I suppose. I mean, they probably deal with apostates, if it's a bigger city and they're high-up, but for me... I'd hear stories about

somebody bringing in an apostate twenty years ago, and he'd still be telling it like a man talking about an especially large fish he caught. Overall, though..." He pulls another blade of grass out of the ground. "Yeah, just guardsmen with extra-shiny armor. And superiority complexes, so you see why I got out." When he digs his thumb in to split the blade of grass in half, its green scent drifts up to him.

"I see." She hums, and slows the movement of her knife, looking at the scraped-up piece of wood in her hand. "There was a boy in the Circle, a mage, a few years older than me. He was maybe fifteen when I got there. And he'd been there three years, and he'd already escaped three times—*tried* to escape a lot more. I heard they put him through his Harrowing early so the templars couldn't recommend making him tranquil to prevent any more attempts."

He remembers what she said about the Joining. That it hurt more than her Harrowing—but she said it like it was a surprise, like she'd thought nothing else was ever going to hurt that bad. Alistair knows templars go through a vigil, but he's pretty sure you just have to stay awake all night and kneel in the chantry. The worst you can get is bruised kneecaps and numb legs and a headache from being awake so long. And there's a reason it's called a *Vigil* and not a *Harrowing*.

That a fifteen-year-old would have gone through a Harrowing already...

"He told me once—because I was in one of the last groups of apprentices he was allowed to babysit—that there's no such thing as a good templar, because good templars quit before they become templars. They stopped letting him mind the apprentices because he kept telling us things like that." Her eyes catch his again. "You're a good templar, Alistair. Because you left."

"Becoming a Warden is a *lot* better," Alistair agrees with her. "I don't think I'd like being stuck to the chantry forever. All that praying. And vows. I've never understood the 'chastity until you're married' thing, either, I mean, there's some *things* in the Chant about Andraste and the Maker. Although, they *were* married, weren't they...?" He knows he's trailing off into his usual rabbit-trail of rambling.

"I've never seen the appeal of the chantry. One of my friends fell in love with a chantry sister," she says. "He said he'd 'never really *listened* to the Chant before he heard it in her lovely voice'." She takes on the affectation of a moon-struck romantic as she quotes. "Stupid."

"Have Leliana put that one in the ballad she's already trying to write," Alistair says. "'Love is stupid', Georgie Amell, 9:30—"

"Not *love*," she interrupts him. "A mage and a chantry sister. You're supposed to fool around with other mages, so you don't get caught."

"Other *mages*, hm? Sure you weren't *jealous*?" Alistair suggests.

Her nose wrinkles like she's smelled something awful. "*Maker*, no. Besides, it's almost as stupid to get involved with a man. Or at least it's more difficult. Why would I, when the girl who had the bunk above mine was perfectly amenable?"

"Why would you," Alistair echoes, a little dazed.

"Don't tell me the templar recruits never figured that one out. Is *that* why all of them are always wound so tight? Figures."

"I... do not know how to answer that," Alistair says. If they have, it wasn't the preference of the others in Alistair's group of recruits. He was pretty sure most of them had sweethearts in the village. And if they *were* tugging one another, they wouldn't've told *Alistair*.

"No," she sighs, lobbing the rest of the chunk of wood at the fire and tucking the knife back in her belt. "I don't suppose you would."

He's really not sure what that means.

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Georgie starts to get the nightmares, and instead of turning to Leliana for comfort, or even going and getting her massive guard dog, she comes to *Alistair*.

Because he's another Warden, probably, but he likes to think it's also because she's closest to him.

It's usually only a day's travel to Redcliffe, but they've been slowed down by the darkspawn pouring out of the south by way of Lothering. Every time they see another harried group of refugees being run down by Genlocks, the Wardens have to jump in, which means Morrigan has to scoff at them and tell them in no uncertain terms how much time they're wasting. Her lecturing, of course, wastes more time.

So this is their second night out of Lothering, and Alistair wakes to the usual bad dreams, but has the unusual feeling of a presence at his back. He starts, before he realizes it must be Georgie. Leliana would have no reason to get into his tent, and is much smaller than Alistair's fellow Warden, besides. (Georgiana Amell is built like she ought to be a warrior, not a mage, and Alistair's never quite seen a woman like her.)

"George...?"

He can hear her breathing unsteadily, like she's trying to work herself down from a full panic. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No, nope, the screeching of the Archdemon did that," he says, thumbing sleep out of his eye as he turns to look at her over his shoulder. "You alright?"

"No. The screeching of the Archdemon—you know."

It's not just that you can hear the Archdemon, and not even just that you can see it, although seeing an enormous tainted dragon is enough to frighten anybody. It's that you can feel the entire seething army of the darkspawn, which means you know exactly how many of them there are. It's like when you knock down a wall and find out the inside is an enormous beehive, and you see them all writhing around there, knowing they're about to come at you, stingers first.

He turns onto his back. Doesn't look at her, just at the top of the tent. He wouldn't want somebody watching him while he struggled with his

anxieties, either. "A good night's sleep: that's the thing they never tell you you're giving up when you do the Joining."

She laughs wetly. "Worth it. For me, at least."

"Yeah," he says. "It is for me, as well."

He thinks about it, then, telling her where he's from, who he really is. He's gonna have to before they reach Redcliffe. But it seems rude to make the conversation about himself when she's the one who's so upset, and he selfishly wants to put it off until the last possible moment, likely when they're standing outside the village gates.

"I don't sleep well alone, anyhow," she says. "They pack us all into these bunkrooms as apprentices, and even some of the mages have to share double-beds. Leliana is alright, but she's so quiet, she sleeps like a mouse. It's like there's not even anybody there."

"So you're saying you *like* that I snore?" He's not actually sure he snores. Nobody's ever told him so.

"I wouldn't mind it," she says. "Long as you wouldn't mind sharing a tent with a girl."

There are several reasons this is a bad idea, least of all that George is a girl, even if she does have a fellow's name. Worst of all is that George is very pretty, even if she is almost of a height with Alistair. Actually, that might make her prettier.

Alistair has never been good around pretty girls, he gets all tongue-tied and stupid. He can't imagine how he'd be sleeping beside one. And Maker, if his *body* decided to react, he'd burn up from the embarrassment.

But, he *could* just face away from her. It's still a terrible idea but that little thought wheedles its way into his mind, and then he realizes all of a sudden that he's been waiting too long to answer.

"I don't mind," he says.

She doesn't quite smile, but her brow smooths out. "Good," she says, pulling a blanket 'round her shoulders. He recognizes it as the one from her bedroll. She came into his tent having already decided she wanted to spend the night there, and he imagines if he didn't wake, she would have just curled up there. It's one of those things that shouldn't be charming, and wouldn't be, if somebody like, say, Sandal decided to do it.

But it's her, and he likes her, so it's charming.

He falls asleep with her at his back, and he rests easier than he expects to.

He wakes up and she's wormed her way into his arms and he needs to extricate himself immediately and take a *very* cold dip in the river, but she doesn't seem to notice his abrupt getaway, or if she does, she doesn't know the purpose.

She smiles a little brighter at him the next morning, and he notices she has dimples, and everything seems *wonderful* until he remembers he has to tell her he's the bastard son of King Maric in a matter of hours.

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She takes it well, actually. Or maybe she's just put it to the back of her mind because the undead horde, the poisoned arl, the demon-possessed child, and the blood ritual take precedence.

Alistair's definitely put it in the back of his mind. They went through the kennels and he didn't even flinch—rather, he did flinch, but it was because of the walking corpses attacking from every direction, not the terrible childhood memories.

He thinks the blood mage is that friend from the Circle Georgie mentioned, the one he accused her of being jealous over. Having met him, Alistair feels quite assured that she's *not*, and he isn't sure why that's a relief. The distant alarm bells of 'catching feelings' ringing through his mind are a welcome distraction from the constant stress of being back in Redcliffe, though.

When they return to camp, they're all exhausted. They spent a night without sleep, fighting, followed by a day of more fighting. Still, Alistair can't help but notice that Georgie's pack has been moved into his tent, and Leliana is enjoying more space for her lutes and her cheeses and whatever else she keeps in her tent.

He's about ready to pass out when Georgie says she has something for him.

It's his mother's amulet, neatly repaired as if by a professional jeweler. Arl Eamon must have put it back together, a kinder courtesy than Alistair expected. He's pretty sure Georgie just up and *stole* it from the castle, but moreover, she *remembered*, and he's... well, he's touched, and he's going to have to blame the tears on exhaustion.

He's thanked her thoroughly for it, told her he doesn't think most people listen when he rambles, and he's got it clasped in shaky hands when she asks if he wants to wear it.

"That is... that's probably the best way to keep it safe, isn't it?" Because he is going to keep it safe this time. He is. Even if his life may be more dangerous, he's at least no longer prone to fits of pique. "Can you...? The clasp is a bit fiddly, and my hands are..."

"Sure, give it here."

It takes him a second to realize he needs to uncurl his hand for her to take it. He's clutched it protectively without meaning to.

Her tongue pokes out from the corner of her mouth as she fusses with the clasp (he wasn't kidding about it being fiddly) but then she pops it free, and he leans closer for her to fasten it behind his neck.

He remembered it being bigger, but he must have just been smaller. It hangs just below the pendant that holds the vial of darkspawn blood from his Joining.

Her hands stay on his shoulders, and he can feel his chest rising and falling a little more than usual as he tries to breathe evenly. The terrible sunburn

George got on their first day in the field has faded, and now she has a smattering of freckles coming in across her nose and cheeks.

There's one on her lower lip, he thinks, or it's a shadow. The mage-light she hangs in the eaves of the tent creates strange shadows as it shifts and curls, casting a warm amber glow.

He clears his throat and tears his gaze from hers. "I... I actually have something for you, too."

"You don't have to get me anything," says the woman who also didn't *have* to find a beloved keepsake Alistair stupidly threw away ten years ago.

It's in his bag still, wrapped up in a little bit of cloth that had been part of a scarf at some point. The petals at the edges are starting to dry out, and one or two have fallen off, but overall, the rose still looks just as bright red and lovely as it did when he picked it. "Know what this is?"

She cups it in her hands—it's just the blossom, not the stem—turning it back and forth to look at it in the light. "I don't remember seeing any roses in Redcliffe." She's right. Redcliffe is mostly varying shades of brown.

"I picked it back in Lothering, actually." He's amazed it's lasted this long, and the romantic part of him can't help but wonder if this is something magic. "I remember thinking, *'how could something so beautiful exist in a place with so much despair and ugliness?'*"

She's something beautiful. Her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks, and he watches that little indent of her cheek when she smiles. With her hair long and loose, only in her shirtsleeves, one bright rose cupped between her hands, she looks like she could be a painting of Andraste. "I don't remember seeing these in Lothering, either, but I was a little too preoccupied to catch you making yourself an enemy of whatever gardener these came from."

He shrugs, folding his hands together in his lap because he doesn't have anything to do with them. "I probably should have left it alone, but I couldn't."

She turns it again, the pad of her thumb brushing the velvet curl of the petals. "It's probably all that's left of Lothering's beauty now. I'm glad you kept a piece of that sentiment."

"That's why I thought I might... give it to you." He takes a breath to steady himself, but feels unsteadier than ever. "In a lot of ways, I think the same thing when I look at you." Because they are *surrounded* by despair and ugliness, from the wretchedness of the Blight itself to the nasty attitudes of people who seem to be only out to save themselves. And among all that, she's powerful but also *kind*. She's willing to help villagers make a stand for themselves against armies of monsters, she's gentle to a blacksmith's daughter she finds hiding in the castle, and she performs dangerous magic just to save the life of a child.

And also, she's gorgeous.

He can't tell her all that, so he says something about her time as a Grey Warden, how she's got all of the bad and none of the good and keeps pushing despite it, and through all of it, she's looking back and forth between the rose and his face, and her eyes are as bright as the polished oak of her staff. She doesn't try to interrupt him, and he knows now that it's not because she's stopped listening, it's because she's paying close attention to what he's saying.

His throat feels tight as he tells her, "I thought maybe I could say something. Tell you what a rare and wonderful thing you are amidst all this darkness."

She's still smiling, and that's not rare, but it's wonderful too.

"I wish I could keep this from wilting," she says. "It's a wonder it's even lasted this long."

Right. Dammit. Didn't she vocally agree with something Morrigan said a while back, about how cut flowers are an odd choice for a gift because they die so quickly?

She turns around to grab her pack, rustling around in it, though he's not exactly sure why and she doesn't stop to explain it to him. "I guess it was just a stupid impulse," Alistair says. "I dunno. Was it the wrong one?" He sounds horribly tentative, his voice very small.

She pulls out a thick book bound in leather that's been dyed that deep shade of blue she seems to like, if her leggings are any indication. It's almost Warden blue, he thinks, and it's a bit funny she's liked the color even before she joined. The book is her grimoire, he's pretty sure. "It wasn't the wrong impulse at all," she says. "It's quite lovely, actually, I just want to make sure I preserve it."

She undoes the leather clasp to open the grimoire, flipping it to a blank page in the center, and she puts the rose on the page, arranging it so that it faces upward, as flat as it can go.

"Oh! I didn't think to do that."

"My mother taught me to press flowers when I was little. Usually, you'd want to set it somewhere beneath a whole stack of books for a few days, but, well. I think it ought to work this way." She shuts the book, buckles it tightly closed, and runs her fingers across the cover.

"See, that's brilliant, but I'd probably forget about it, and then I'd open the book and flowers would fall out, and I'd wonder, '*when did I put that in there?*'"

"I'm not going to forget about this," she says.

"No, I didn't mean to say you would! Or that you wouldn't. Agh. It's not important. I'm glad you like it," he says, desperately grasping for his usual deflection, a joke to lighten the mood. "Now. If we could just move right on past this awkward, embarrassing stage, and get right to the steamy bits, I'd appreciate it." He grins, hoping that works well enough. They tease one another back and forth like this sometimes now—on the way into Redcliffe, George asked him if anybody had ever told him he was handsome.

She sighs with put-upon drama, replacing her grimoire in her pack. "And you were doing so well, too."

"*I was?*" He's baffled, honestly. He thought he'd been mucking it all up.

"You were. Although, if you *want* to get right with the steamy bits, you could just take this off," she says, plucking at his shirt.

He's blushing now, he knows he is. "Ahaha, well, looks like you called my bluff," he says, and spouts rather a lot of other stupid jabbering, before saying, "we ought to just go to sleep. I'm going to lie down. And face that way. Until the blushing stops."

"You're a strange creature, Alistair."

He'd think she's expressing something negative, but she surges forward and puts her arms around his waist, squeezing him tight, her cheek pressed to his chest, right above the amulet she's just returned to him. She's not gentle, hugs him tighter than he'd expect, and he puts his arms around her shoulders in response, not quite sure where he should settle his hands. They were all washed and fed in Redcliffe (although they refused the offer to spend the night in the castle and he thinks that might have something to do with how anxious he was about the suggestion) and her hair smells like fresh soap.

Her shirt is thin enough that he can feel the muscle of her back and shoulders, *and* he can feel she doesn't wear anything underneath it. More importantly, he's pretty sure she can feel how sweaty his palms are, so he curls his hands into fists against her back, hoping that's not too strange. She strokes her hands down his flanks as she pulls away, and settles them on his waist. It makes him *shiver*. He really does need to lie down.

He never thought falling for somebody was going to feel like this. It's like he's boiling from the inside. If he weren't so damn tired, he'd stay up all night thinking about it.

He falls asleep easy, though, facing the wall of the tent with her tucked against his back, her arm around his chest, her hand over his heart.

He watches Georgie more than he ought to after that.

He watches her sing along to whatever Leliana's strumming while they travel, and he watches her argue in circles with Sten, refusing to back down and agree with him just because he's so set in his beliefs. He watches her talk to a golem like it's a person and not a walking hunk of rock that's also a convicted murderer, and he watches her help an assassin to his feet and welcome him to the team.

It seems to be impossible to dislike her. Bodhan shares rumors he comes by with her, Morrigan allows her to sit under her weird little lean-to for a long, hushed conversation, Zevran flirts with her uncontrollably, and Shale seems absolutely delighted whenever George gifts her interesting rocks.

They make their way to Denerim with their merry band of assassins, murderers, witches, and Wardens, and when Alistair haltingly brings up that he wants to see his sister, Georgie says *of course* they can make time for that, and she squeezes his hand before darting off ahead to (as he predicted she would) ask Morrigan to teach her to change shape.

He's going to have to tell her how he feels before he combusts. He *thinks* there might be something there for her too, but at the same time, he thinks he's fooling himself, seeing affection specifically pointed at him where, in reality, George loves everybody.

When they camp tonight, on the road between Redcliffe and Denerim, he'll tell her.

He's not fooling himself. *Maker*, he's not fooling himself.

She's there, she's in his arms, she's said she feels the same... He almost wants to ask her to repeat it just so he can be sure he's not imagined it. But then he might start rambling like an idiot *again*, and he's already baffled it didn't put her off the first time.

But he didn't. Somehow. And she's kissing him. They're not even in their tent, just sitting at the fire, and probably anyone could see them, if they cared to pay attention. But Zevran went to a pond nearby to bathe and Leliana went to bed early and Sten and Shale don't really seem to entertain the idea of romance and *it doesn't matter*, because she's *kissing* him.

He's not sure what to do with his hands. He's generally certain what to do with his mouth, but he's fine with letting her take the lead there, too, and she's fine with taking it, it seems, cupping his face in her hands and tipping his jaw where she wants it. He finally settles his hand on the back of her head, feeling the texture of the plait her hair is woven into. It goes all the way up to her crown, some Orlesian style Leliana did earlier.

When she pulls away, she's smiling, and the firelight makes bright yellow reflections in her eyes. He doesn't know where all the air in his lungs has gone. His voice comes out practically a sigh.

"Maker's breath, but you are beautiful."

—

The high of that moment—and of going to sleep afterward with her curled around him, feeling rather like he belongs to her—takes a downturn when they start exploring the city and Alistair comes upon the address he has memorized.

Redcliffe may have been a catastrophe, but Denerim was worse. Not on a grand scale, just for Alistair, personally. And a little bad for Arl Eamon, because they're going to have to go all the way to the Frostbacks to find the possible magical cure for all that ailed him.

Still, Alistair would rather yell his backstory and his parentage from the rooftops than be shouted out by a sister who would hardly even *listen* to him. If she just *understood*...

He left with his head hanging, but the rest of their party was sympathetic, at least.

Then they were jumped by bandits in an alleyway. Normally, this would have been another negative, but somebody to fight was a welcome relief, even if Shale took out most of them before Alistair got a chance.

He's still sore over Goldanna even now he's back at camp, and he's just glad that neither the gossipy elven assassin nor the witch were party to the altercation. It had just been Georgie, Leliana, and Shale (who did not care at all about human beings and their troubles, unless the humans were troublesome enough for her to crush them into powder).

He's flat on his back on the ground, with Pudding, George's mabari, laying on top of him, panting hot breath onto Alistair's chin and enjoying the way Alistair scritchd the wrinkles around his neck. Nothing like petting a wonderful and adorable dog to make you forget that you sort of looked like an ass in front of your sister *and* the woman you've been having a bit of something confusing and romantic with.

He's been trying to flirt since that kiss. He even asked Leliana for advice, although he immediately put his foot in his mouth upon broaching the topic. Leliana said to be himself, but that's easy to say for somebody who's charming and sweet and kind like she is. At least her suggestions were more feasible than *Zevran's*.

Somebody plops down in the grass just behind his head and leans forward, peering at his face. Alistair takes his eyes off Pudding just as a lock of dark hair falls against his cheek. It's like he's summoned her just by thinking about her.

"Hullo, George."

She's got her hair unbound and it's still wet—she's done with her bath, then. "Alistair. Do you need me to call off the beast, or was this a voluntary entrapment?"

Right, most people would not want to have a hundred-and-some pounds of mabari on them. "No, he's fine where he is." Being weighed down by something is oddly calming, right now. Keeps him from feeling adrift, he supposes.

"Right, well, did you want to go get washed up now none of the ladies are at the river?"

He shakes his head. "No, thank you, I did it beforehand." They're still sleeping in tents and bathing at the river because they don't have the coin to spend on a room at the inn, although they have resupplied in Denerim, so the food's good today (and Alistair didn't cook, so it's especially good). It makes Goldanna crowing about him being an extremely wealthy prince and not wanting to share that with family even *more* ironic.

Georgie flicks her hair back over her shoulder. It's long down to her waist when she has it out of the bun she keeps it in most of the time. At night, she braids it, either sitting in the tent or in front of the fire, and he likes watching the nimble flick of her fingers. She can do it without looking. "You know, you *could* take a bath with the rest of us," she teases him. "Sten does, sometimes. So does Zevran."

That makes him grimace—Zevran is *definitely* doing that to stare at the girls. But Alistair has no doubt that if he was rude beyond what they appreciated, Georgie and Morrigan would set him on fire, and Leliana would stab him. "I. No. I could very much not do that," he says.

"Chantry really got in your head on that one, huh?" She's leaning her elbow on her knee, and her hand on her palm. It puts her face directly above his, about a handspan away. "You'd not be the only one averting your eyes, Alistair. I promise you Sten doesn't want to look, either."

Zevran *did* look, then.

"It's not that I don't want to look."

She grins, wide enough to show the gap where one of her teeth got knocked out during one of their many scuffles with darkspawn in Ostagar. It's not her eyetooth, it's the one next to it, closer to the corner of her mouth than the middle. "So you *do* want to look."

"Don't use my words against me like that!" He knows he's blushing. Pudding puts his chin on Alistair's chest so that he can move to scratching

the back of his neck. He's had a bath too, no longer colored with the kaddis Georgie has taken to putting on him.

"It's alright, Alistair." She fixes his collar where Pudding has disturbed it, and then straightens out the pendant and the amulet so they rest where they're supposed to in the middle of his chest. "Why else do you think I'm telling you that you should join us?"

"You... *want* me to want to look?" Alistair is baffled and Pudding is snoring. Suddenly, the weight of the dog on top of him is feeling less like a comfort and more like a trap.

"Not quite, big guy. Though I wouldn't mind." She ruffles his hair, and that's nice. She's very hands-on, George. It seems like it comes from living in such close quarters with so many people, but there's something about her, in specific, that makes it all feel very natural and kind. "No, you're not considering that *I* would like to look at *you*."

"*Naked?*" he squeaks, flushing even deeper.

"Yeah, Alistair. Maker knows I look at you clothed often enough."

Oh. "Oh."

"Does that bother you?" she asks.

"No. No, it doesn't bother me. The opposite, actually. It un-bothers me. Although I do have... no idea what to say." Well, he has several ideas of what to say, such as: '*You have me whenever and however you want me,*' or, '*can we try that kissing thing again?*' or just a very monosyllabic, '*hnngh.*' He has no *good* idea what to say.

"You don't have to say anything, if you don't want to. I'm just letting you know. That statement stands for *inside* the tent just as much as outside it, by the way."

Maker's *breath*. She's so *forward*. Alistair didn't know girls—women—could be that way. It's like now she knows he's attracted to her, she's

stopped holding back. He didn't even realize he *was* holding back. "Uh. So. I have to let you know, I've no idea what I'm doing when it comes to—" Sex. "—this, and so... spell it out for me, please, George. I know that's not very, er, attractive of me, but I'm terribly worried I'm following this innuendo wrong—Maker, *is* it an innuendo?"

"I think saying 'I would like to look at you, naked, and I would like this to happen in your tent' is a bit more than an innuendo." She *should* sound more annoyed than she does, instead, she just sounds playful. "I'm asking if you want to sleep with me. Oh! That is an innuendo, just in case, I mean, we do sleep together every night."

"No, that one I get. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. You've really never?" She's referring to that *awful* thing he said about licking lampposts, a conversation which he really wishes she would forget.

"No." If he sounds breathless, he's gonna blame the canine seated on his ribcage.

"Would you prefer not to? Some people just don't." There's a note of concern in her voice, like she's trying to gentle him.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean no, I wouldn't just prefer not to. I've never found the right person."

"Oh." That's all she says. She leans back, maybe looks a bit upset.

He realizes what he's done and sits up so abruptly he wakes Pudding, who clambers off of him and trots away, off to find attention from somebody who's not so romantically disgruntled. "I mean I've never found the right person *before*. Before you. You're the right person." It's too close to '*I love you*,' which is a thought he's already had a dozen times over, and he has to close his mouth before he says something even closer. He does it so quickly his teeth click.

She pulls him in by the front of his shirt and kisses him, and for a second he must be like kissing a statue, for all he responds. He's frozen until he melts against her, taking a deep breath in through his nose.

When she pulls away, she's holding her hand gingerly between them. "You have dog drool on your shirt," she says, and wipes it on his cheek just to be a bastard about it.

"And now it's on my *face*, thank you ever so much," he says. "See if I kiss you again."

She tips her head to the side and gives him a look of consideration. "I think you will," she says, and stands, going straight back to their tent.

He scrambles to his feet and follows her.

Despite the topic of conversation, he doesn't do anything more than kiss her that night, but he does kiss her a *lot*. It's nothing compared to that first soft exchange before they reached the city, it's so much more, and it's *very* distracting from the horrible afternoon he's had.

Alistair is realizing quickly that he's never *really* been kissed before.

There's so much more *tongue* involved than he would have thought.

—

They're four days into a week-long trip to the village Haven in the foothills of the Frostbacks, and Alistair has spent every night of it bone-weary from travel, from whatever skirmish they entered with darkspawn or bandits or wolves who got along a little too well with the Blight.

He also spends every night of the trip with George.

He and George take the first watch, because Leliana and Zevran don't mind waking early, and Sten and Morrigan don't mind their sleep being disturbed in the middle of the night. Shale is always watching from the opposite side of camp, but it's a bit of a toss-up as to whether she'd actually shout if something nasty came out of the woods. Pudding manages whatever is left

unprotected, still alert enough even when sleeping to wake up and bark like the archdemon itself is bearing down on them.

Most nights aren't too busy. darkspawn aren't fond of fire, and their camp is like a glowing beacon. Bandits aren't fond of heavily armed crews of warriors, and they're well-equipped enough that they don't look like good marks. Wolves and bears and wildcats are most likely to attack, but they won't do it unless provoked, so watch duty primarily involves keeping the center campfire lit, and telling anybody who's stupid to come close to just keep on walking.

Alistair assumes that Sten and Morrigan don't even have to do that last bit, because they are terrifying enough that nobody would need a verbal warning.

He and George talk, mostly, while they're on watch. They wouldn't do something as stupid as tangling themselves up in one another while they're trying to keep eyes on the darkness around them, no matter how much Alistair might want to. Alistair likes to sit on the grass while George perches himself on whatever log or stump or big rock they've dragged over to the campfire to function as a makeshift seat, her knees apart so he can sit between them, and her arms folded around his shoulders. It's especially nice. When she talks, he can feel her voice buzzing through her ribcage just as much as he can hear it.

Their backs face the fire, and they look out at the dark, watching and waiting, only turning when the heat dies down behind them and one of them has to stoke the fire. Alistair realizes he has more stories than he thought about growing up in Redcliffe, some of them sad and some of them not so much, and George describes life in the Circle (which is impressive, in that she can make *magical powers* sound so dreadfully boring). She gives him her thoughts on their compatriots, and informs him that Morrigan is, indeed, teaching her to shapeshift, and she'll be able to show him some of it soon. She says he'll like it, in a way that makes him think he definitely will not.

And every night, as the moon starts to rise and somebody else is going to take over for them soon, this woman who has become so dear to him, who

Alistair is falling deeply in love with, decides to *absolutely fucking torture him*.

It's torture of the best kind. They'll be looking out into the dark landscape before them, having just determined that the movement out there is a herd of deer or elk and *not* a bunch of wolves, and she'll hug him a little tighter, drop her head so she can talk directly into his ear, and tell him *exactly* what she intends to do once their watch is over.

It's not *dirty*. Not exactly. When they've been fighting through it all day, she tells him she's going to help ease some of that soreness that he gets in his shoulders from repetitive sword work, and then she uses hands warmed by magic to massage him into a comfortable puddle at the end of the night. When she's been overly stressed by whatever trouble they've run into, she asks him to brush her hair with the wide wooden comb she keeps in her pack. Alistair has never had long hair himself, nor has he had a sister or any other girl around, so she has to teach him how to hold it further up to keep from pulling the roots when he works out tangled bits. He likes doing it for her, and he likes running his fingers through after it's been combed enough.

When they both can't stop looking at one another all day (he's usually thinking, '*Maker, how did I get so lucky?*' and so he's got no idea what she could be thinking) she tells him how she's going to kiss him everywhere, slow and teasing, 'til he's making all those whining noises.

She seems to love the noises, which is good, because he seriously cannot help them.

Certainly not when she's kissing him and taking off his armor at the same time. She's been watching him do it, apparently, because she knows where all the buckles and catches are. Sometimes she pulls them a little too hard just to tug him around. It makes him want to fall to his knees.

Tonight, he *does* fall to his knees. It's not on purpose, he just got wobbly all of a sudden because she...

Because she squeezed his chest.

"Are you alright?" she asks, stepping forward, putting a hand on her shoulder.

He cups the back of her knee, pressing his forehead to her thigh. "I'm fiiiine, I just—oh, Maker, that's embarrassing."

"What's embarrassing?"

"I dunno—that you touched me for half a second and it felt so good I fell over?"

She's cupping the back of his head now and she's made no attempt to join him on the tent floor, which he actually likes. She's standing over him, sort of protective almost, and it lets him drag his own breathing slower without worrying that she's right there watching him.

He's so hard it's made him *dizzy*, and all he's had was a very efficient unarmoring, a lengthy series of kisses, and a fraction of a moment of groping.

It makes him think of last night.

He's really been trying *not* to think of last night.

While they were on watch, he started talking about sex, except he didn't say he was talking about sex, he just said various increasingly distressed things about not wanting to wait, because they could die any time, really, and what's the point of waiting anyhow?

And she said, 'yes,' and, '*whenever you like, Alistair,*' and he'd said, '*tonight?*' because he'd never been a paragon of patience. Or even a mostly positive example of patience.

Here's why he's trying not to think of last night: it was good. It was very good, although he can really only say that for himself, and he'd like to think she wouldn't lie, but she would maybe exaggerate to save his feelings. She says she wouldn't. But last night was very...

Brief.

On his part.

Brief in the way that meant he had to sneak past Morrigan and Sten (who probably didn't care anyhow) to the river to wash out his trousers and that pair of smallclothes because, uh.

He didn't exactly have time to undress.

She undressed, halfway at least, and it was the important half, too. He hadn't helped get her off, really, he mostly watched how she did it because he knew his hands would be clumsy and his touch unfocused unless she taught him first.

Watching her touch herself, her legs spread to show off for him, the quick movements of her fingers and the rocking of her hips to meet them—if he thinks about it, he's going to come in his trousers again.

“Still okay?” she asks, because he's been quiet a long time.

“Yeah.” He slips his hand away from her leg and leans back to give her space to kneel down before him. “I just didn't expect that to feel... wow.”

“Do you know much about anatomy, Alistair?” She trails her fingers along the neckline of his shirt as she talks, then follows the curve down the center of his pectorals.

“I did tend to sleep through most of my biology lessons,” he says.

“I stayed awake for all the most important parts,” she says. “Such as: there are a *lot* of nerves that end right around here.” She squeezes again for emphasis and he bites his lower lip through a moan. It feels unthinkable good.

“Yeah—I mean—I thought for *girls*.”

“Depends on the person.” She presses her thumb against his nipple and oh, hey, yes, there go the noises. “I never got much out of it, myself, but it seems you're a little bit more sensitive.”

Alistair's thought about... breasts, before. He's thought about *hers*. Seen them, even. Last night! (She'd noticed him staring. She'd been unbothered by it, although she maybe thought he was a bit silly when he lost track of his thoughts mid-sentence looking at her.)

He's never really thought much of his *own* chest, except now he's thinking about it and he's never gonna stop thinking about it because she's still *fondling* him and it's. A lot.

"Want me to keep going?"

"I—sort of? It's just, if you keep doing this, I'm going to— *ah*— well, it's going to be over too fast again."

"Oh, Alistair," she sighed, a smile on her face, "I don't care about that. We've time for other things later."

And, well, what she's doing to him right now is quite convincing.

—

The next day, *Zevran* tries to give him *advice* on how to *last longer*.

Alistair's never been so red-faced in his life, not even when he got so sunburned it started peeling.

He tries to tell *Zevran*, 'thanks, but no thanks,' but *Zevran* just keeps talking, and George may be ten steps ahead and chatting to *Morrigan*, but he's sure she's listening.

He confirms this when she drops back alongside the two of them to pick up the thread of conversation. "Don't worry about that, Alistair," she says, waving her hand as if chasing off imaginary flies. "That would only be a problem if you weren't *equally* invested in *me*, after."

"I should have known our Alistair would be a gentleman," *Zevran* sighs. "It is a pity he has such strong preferences for women, no?"

"No," says Alistair.

"You'd be too much for him, Zev." George pats Alistair on the small of his back. Alistair would like to be affronted (even though it's probably true) but she smoothly changes the subject. "Now: would the two of you like to see a new skill I've picked up on the road?"

"Always, my lady," says Zevran, who has really no right to call her *'his'* anything.

"Course," says Alistair.

He's expecting her to flip an arrow around between her fingers like Leliana can, or do that trick Bodhan does where he makes a coin disappear (thinking back on that, Alistair's not sure he ever got his silver returned to him—maybe it's more effective than previously presumed).

He's *not* expecting her to spread her hands out, glow with blue-white light for a second, and then *turn into a giant fucking spider*.

He shrieks, scrambling away from her, and Zevran swears at length in Antivan as he does the same. Alistair doesn't like spiders at all, much less giant ones, much *less* when they used to be his girlfriend two seconds ago.

Everybody else has turned around watching, even Sten and Shale, who are up there at the head of the traveling party, in front of Bodhan's wagon and the mule that pulls it along. Leliana looks just as horrified as Alistair must, Sandal is applauding, and Morrigan has a shitty fucking grin on her face that, above all things, proves this is *her fault*.

Alistair rounds on her. "You! Why would you do this!?"

"I? I did nothing," Morrigan says, with that air of aloofness that he hates. Spider-George is scurrying around somewhere behind them. Zevran has run for the wagon and hopped up onto it. "She did this herself, did you not see?"

"You *taught* her to!" He can't look directly at Morrigan, because he's trying to track the *spider*, which his brain is still telling him is an enemy out to kill him.

"She is an impressive student. Not all could master something such as this so quickly." Morrigan rubs her temples like he's giving her a headache. "*Do* stop screaming, Alistair, you ought to appreciate her gifts. Only a very powerful mage could—"

"But *why* would you pick a *spider*!?" He's seen Morrigan turn into a wolf and a bird, both of which would be *much* more preferable.

Pudding has noticed the commotion from where he was off ranging about asserting his dominance on local landmarks, and he comes racing back, bounding in circles around the spider. For a second, Alistair thinks Pudding might actually save them—that George might have to turn back before he bites her—but then Pudding is play-bowing and wuffing happily, not at all concerned that his master has become an arachnid the size of a horse.

"Spiders are simple creatures, and it is easy to master their form," Morrigan said. "Personally, I think that transforming into an average-sized one would be much more useful for espionage, but Georgie always has liked a fight."

George—the spider that is currently George—rears up on its hind legs and hisses, showing off its disgusting underbelly. Alistair feels a little woozy. He's heard about spiders like this living deep in caves or in the hollows of the Breilian forest, but he's never seen one quite so large and he doesn't want to *ever* again.

"Georgie, *please*, turn back."

She does not.

He rounds on Morrigan. "You *did* teach her to turn back, right? What if she can't turn back?"

"Then you are going to need more advice in the bedroom than I can give!" Zevran calls from his perch. Leliana is the only one acting sensibly. She has her bow in her hand and an arrow nocked.

"I'm not going to! You know! With a *spider*!"

Morrigan examines her nails casually. Alistair's not sure what there is to look at, because she chews them to the quick. "Were you two not having some sickening conversation yesterday in which she asked if you would still love her even if she were a bug? I recall you saying 'of course'."

They were quite tipsy at the time, George having brought out a bottle of a sweet, floral liqueur she'd picked up a while back. It had been a *hypothetical*, and a stupid one. "I never said I meant in the physical sense!" Although, emotionally, that would also be quite difficult. Unless she's hiding something else, she cannot talk in this form.

He's practically *faint* by the time she turns back, and she's laughing her arse off, of course. She looks immensely pleased with herself, her eyes bright and her hair falling loose, and she's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, but he can't quite get over the fact that she was very recently a giant spider.

He sulks a bit all the way to camp, which is located under a rocky overhang that's hemmed in on all sides. The shape of the cliffs means nobody but Shale and Pudding are needed to keep watch, which means a long night's sleep for everybody else. It *should* spell a very fun evening for Alistair and George, except he can't stop getting creepy-crawlies whenever he thinks about the earlier incidents of the day.

"I didn't know you were frightened of them," George says, smoothing her knuckles along his temple. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not—" he starts, but it's a bit of a lie. "George, *everybody* is frightened of giant spiders."

"They're much less frightening when you become one," she says, which doesn't help *him*, now does it? "It's actually fascinating, seeing the world through that many eyes."

The reference to such a number of eyes makes him shudder again. "What if, say, we're sleeping, and you just," he wiggles his fingers to indicate magical happenings, "into a spider, in the middle of the night."

"I can't do that." She takes his hand, puts it in her lap. "It takes a lot of concentration to hold onto the spell. I didn't turn back on purpose, I just thought you were funny, and I had to laugh, and I had to be human to do that. I can't do it without focus."

He's never known her to do any other sort of magic in her sleep, so this does follow a line of logic. Still, though. "Please don't ever do that in our tent."

"I would collapse the tent, I'm too big for it. So, no, I won't."

He lays back, having become quite exhausted with relief. "You know, George," he tells her, "sometimes I think about what it would have been like if you'd been around at other parts of my life. Like in the monastery—it's silly, you're a woman, you wouldn't be allowed in—but I think back then I would have been *thrilled* to watch you turn into a spider and run around the halls sowing chaos."

She leans on one elbow and puts her other hand over his chest, tracing the line and dip of his collarbone. "I'll just have to let you in on the next prank I pull. Not a spider, obviously, everybody would know it's me. But Morrigan said next she'll teach me to turn into a bear."

"Oh, now *that*, I can get behind," Alistair says. "It's bear country out here anyway, they'll all be fooled. You'll be... un *bear* able."

She grins. Leliana says puns are the lowest form of humor, but Georgie likes his puns. She follows up with, "you'll have to bear with me, I suppose."

"Come now, that one was the bare minimum of a joke."

She shoves at him and he wrestles back, grappling at her waist and trying to flip him, while she puts her thigh over his hip and tries to keep him down.

They're both laughing, although he tries to sound upset when he says, "*stop*, Georgie, I've had a trying day!"

"If it's been so *trying*, why are you endeavoring to get on top?"

He stills, because he doesn't quite have an answer. He holds onto her waist instead of pushing against her. "I've no idea, actually. I should just let you stay right there. It's not like you're heavy or anything." She could be, if she dropped all her weight onto him, but you're not supposed to tell women they're heavy, so he doesn't note that aloud.

"Good. I like this spot." She's sitting astride his waist, but she shifts back a little bit, until she's straddling his hips. "Now. How angry with me are you, exactly?"

For George, getting undressed for bed involves leaving herself in her long shirt, her smallclothes, and nothing else. He can feel the heat of her through his trousers. "I'm... not really angry, you'd just sort of upset me..."

She *wiggles* a little bit atop him.

"And you, *hmm*, you said you were sorry, so there's no harm done and I—
oh, yes, love. Please."

"What do you want, Alistair?"

He only groans, because words are hard to come by.

"Want me to ride you? I'm pretty good at it, although I'm usually the one on top. Or underneath? The one *doing* the fucking."

That is confusing. "But. Er. You don't have." (He *has* been wondering how she ever did it with her lady partners but he figured there was some secret he didn't know.)

"They make toys for that, even in the Circle." Her grin is *wicked*, and he knows he's doing something with his face. Something overwhelmed and desperate. The thought of *her* fucking somebody sort of. Well. *Gets* him. "Maybe I'll find one for you sometime. For now, I think *you* want in, don't you?"

In. *In*. His mind takes too long to process what she means there. In *her*. Oh, Maker. Once he realizes what she's saying, it's impossible to keep himself

from saying, “yes yes I want it yes.”

“Then don’t squirm so much,” she teases. “It’s alright, Alistair, I’ll take care of you.” Her palm makes a trail from the center of his chest down his ribcage, and she rocks back against his dick again.

He’s *begging* now. “Please don’t make me wait, love, I can’t stand it—“

She squeezes his hip like a reassurance and then lifts up a bit, first undoing the laces on his trousers. This is as far as they’ve gotten previously, her hand on his dick (after she’d finished reducing him to a complete mess just by groping his chest, she’d gotten him off in about three strokes).

“Alistair, can you reach my pack, there’s a little jar of oil in the left side pocket—no, your other left.”

He finally finds it and hands it over, and he’s not really sure why she wants it, except that it probably has to do with sex—and then she pours some in her hand and strokes his cock.

If she wasn’t sitting on his thighs he would have bucked into it, but she’s got him pretty well weighed down. He’s expecting that weight to lift soon, after all, she still needs to get her underclothes off, even if her shirt stays on.

But no. She just tugs the crotch of her smalls to the side and gets him in her that way.

It happens so fast he can’t believe it, and he glances down as if to see the place he’s entering her, but her shirt falls down over all that. Of course he knows she’s got it, the heat and the pressure is *incredible*, but it’s as if his mind doesn’t believe what his body feels.

He summarizes this succinctly. “*Fuck!*”

“Oh,” she says, experimentally moving. “You feel different than I’m used to.”

“Is it alright? Does it hurt?” He knows it can hurt sometimes for women. He doesn't want to hurt her.

She shakes her head. “It’s nice. I dunno how to describe it. Don’t ask me to do words right now.”

It’s only this, coupled with the fact that she leans forward and plants her hands on the bedroll on either side of his waist like she needs something to hold herself up, that makes him realize she’s just as overwhelmed as he is. He likes that, he’s always worried he’ll barely be able to affect her. But when she’s breathless after kissing him, red in the face when he tells her he cares for her deeply, moaning while she fucks herself on him, he knows that at least *something* he’s doing is working.

He runs his hands up her thighs, under her shirttails. “Can I... can I touch you?”

Her teeth dig into her lower lip and then release. “*Please.*”

He’s only done this twice now, but he’s starting to get the hang of it. He does lose himself in a momentary fascination with feeling where she’s stretched around his cock, but then he finds her clit, and then she cries out and then she *tightens* around him...

It is altogether too much.

She rocks and grinds on him and he’s worried he won’t know when she comes until he *definitely knows she is*, because it’s very clear from the shout of his name and the way she feels. It’s too good, too good to even think about, the wet-hot press of her urging him towards his own orgasm in a matter of seconds.

He’s still in her when he comes down from it, and he’s not really sure what the most comfortable way to separate himself from her is going to be. She fixes this by pulling up and off and then collapsing on him, crushing all the wind from his lungs.

Her hair is soft and a little damp and it smells like flowers. He winds his arms around her waist and buries his face in her shoulder. Here, he can mouth the words, '*I love you*,' without worrying she's going to see.

They've become accustomed to staying up later in the evenings, and Alistair couldn't possibly fall asleep after that, besides. He's spent, at least when it comes to sex, but his mind is still wide awake. They have their usual evening talk, while she teaches him how to braid her hair.

This isn't what Alistair thought pillow talk was supposed to be like. He imagined it being something serious and romantic, that you were supposed to recite poetry or tell her that her eyes are as bright as the moon. (Her eyes aren't, anyhow, they're dark and handsome.) Instead, they're planning out how Alistair is going to tell a story tomorrow night around the campfire about a terrifying bear that roams this part of the mountains, and then George is going to come lumbering out from behind the wagons in bear form at just the right moment to make everybody scream.

Alistair learns he's awful at braiding hair, but pretty good at the romance thing, if that's what this is.

When they go to sleep that night, she takes her usual spot against his back, and he looks over his shoulder for just a second. "Hey. Would you... do you ever want me to spoon you, instead?" This used to be the only way he could ever imagine them sleeping, because he'd be *mortified* if she woke up to find him having a particularly good dream and his hips were against her ass. Now that they've actually *slept together* instead of just sleeping together, that doesn't seem like it matters.

"All my hair would get in your mouth," she says. "If you truly want to, I'll roll over, but I'm warning you of that."

"Agh, nope, never mind, then." He snuggles back into her embrace. "Besides. I sort of... like you around me, like this."

She kisses the curve of his shoulder. "Good."

—

They don't get a chance to do the bear prank.

Haven is a mess. First there's the cult, then there's the temple itself, which is full of ice and snow and *dragons*, then there's the part where the cult and the dragons are *connected*, and then there's the series of trials to lead them to Andraste's tomb.

Leliana is having a grand religious experience. Alistair is still feeling awkward over the fact that they all had to take their clothes off and walk through some fire in what seems symbolic but is actually quite uncomfortable. Sure, he's seen George naked, but he's pointedly keeping his eyes off Leliana and Leliana is pointedly not bothering about that at all, and Shale (who took off the crystals that adorn her shoulders just to feel like she was participating) kept looking at him like she's trying to figure out the particulars of human gender and why he looks different *down there* .

Then, oops, it's more dragon cultists, because Georgie may have fooled them about her intentions but she couldn't fool them about her actions, and they know she's not really on their side now. Once they've killed the last of them, they have to go back through the tunnels all the way to the mouth of the temple.

The final resting place of the Prophet Andraste is great and all, but Alistair cannot wait to wrap himself up in bed, nice and warm and snug, with George pressed against his back and the thickest blankets and furs they could find lying overtop them.

He tells George as much on their trek down from the temple, and she only laughs weakly and says she'd rather a hot bath. They've all been a little battered over the time they've spent underground (he's not sure if they've been gone one day, two, or more) and humor is hard to come by.

"That's not as effective, actually, because you get cold again as soon as you're out of the water," Alistair tells her. "What really works is sharing body heat. Better if you're naked, even if it's really cold outside, or at least down to your bottom layer." It sounds much nicer when it's her than when this is being presented as something he might need to do to survive the cold

with another templar recruit who also has no interest in snuggling up naked next to another boy.

Shale doesn't even bother with a stage whisper, she just asks Leliana aloud. "Is it telling the other one that it would like to do the fleshy mating rituals once more?"

"Hey!" Alistair crows, looking over his shoulder to take in George's opinion on this statement. He's not sure if she'll be affronted or tickled.

"He better be," she says, but her voice sounds strange and weak and pained.

And then she fucking *drops*.

He manages to catch her before she hits her head on a rock or something, but she's unconscious before she hits his arms, and his heart is racing harder than it did when that high dragon looked directly at them.

He's seen her exhausted during this journey, empty on mana and fighting to keep her eyes open. They had to stop for it once, camping out in a creepy laboratory where cultists were doing unknowable things with dragon eggs. When she's like that, she dozes, drifting in and out of consciousness. She moves too slow and her feet drag but she doesn't just pass out.

He knows this is something worse.

Beneath her traveling cloak, he finds a great deal of blood.

"She's hurt," he says, grimacing as he does his best to turn her around without letting her drop or jostling the wound. "We need to stop the bleeding, and get her back to camp, *fast*."

They're out of just about everything. Poultices, elfroot, all of it. They've got bandages, at least, thank the Maker. Leliana's hands are steadier than his. It's too cold to take off George's shirt or the leather vest she wears over it, so they have to make do winding the bandages tight, even though the blood is already soaking through.

He doesn't know how long she's had this injury. They haven't fought anything since that last round of cultists. Has she been running on adrenaline and pain all the way down the mountain?

Alistair, himself, isn't in great shape. When he tries to pick her up, he gets a protest from the ankle he sprained taking a wrong turn down a tunnel while being pursued by a man with a battleax and a mission.

There's a low rumble from behind him which he understands as Shale clearing her throat.

"Why are you the one carrying it?"

"What?" Alistair wanted to say: *'it's her, why are you the one carrying her,'* but pronouns were beyond Shale at the best of times and this wasn't.

"You are injured. I am not. Let me have it, I will carry it back to camp."

"I thought you didn't like to carry humans around," Alistair isn't about to tell Shale no, but he takes his own cloak off his shoulders and bundles it around George, so that Shale's stone wouldn't scrape her up even more.

"I don't like when they *order* me to do it," Shale clarifies. "It gave me no orders. It cannot. And its magic saved us more than once today."

Meaning to say, Georgie Amell charmed a literal rock into being her friend. Alistair would laugh, if he wasn't so gray-faced and serious about getting back to their camp just outside Haven as soon as humanly possible.

It's hard to keep an eye on her, wrapped up as she is. Alistair tries to tell himself this is just like another soldier being injured, like one of his brothers-in-arms, but it's *not*. He hasn't even told her he *loves her*. She can't...

She can't.

Alistair's barely functional himself when they get back, the cold having gotten to him. Leliana gets him a blanket to bundle up in and sets him by the campfire, because Morrigan is tending to George in their tent and won't

let him in because he is, quote, *'ruining her concentration with his anxious energies'*.

He thinks Morrigan is a little bit anxious, too. Morrigan likes George, because George is a miracle worker. And Morrigan isn't the best healer they have. That's also George, who isn't even a very good healer anyways, but who's kept Alistair from bleeding out more than once.

It's *hours* before he can see her. He can't eat, can't sleep, just keeps wearily looking at the firelight. Leliana got him to drink a cup of tea, but that's about all. His mind and his heart won't stop racing. He's never had somebody he'd hate to lose this badly.

Except maybe Duncan. And he lost Duncan.

It's been a long time since he's thought about Duncan, the man who was more of a father to him in a year than anybody else managed to be his entire life. Duncan had liked George, too. Duncan saw in Alistair a man who would be a proud Warden instead of a defeated templar, and maybe Duncan saw in her a woman who would overturn legend and myth itself.

He hoped that Duncan also saw in her a survivor.

When Morrigan finally emerges from the tent, she says, "I did not do quite as well a job as my mother, when she plucked you from that tower and squirreled you back safe."

Alistair's heart thumps in his throat so hard he cannot breathe.

"But she will be alright. Do not turn that look of surprise upon me. Do you really think me so incompetent?" She twists her hands, betraying stress behind her smooth words. "I would not let her die, Alistair. This is not for your sake, of course."

"You really didn't have to add that," he grumbles.

"She was clawed by some manner of beast, all down her ribs and her side." A drake. He'd seen her go down, but she'd said she was fine. "She is not

conscious but she will wake when she is ready. I am not a practiced healer, however, so her scarring will be extensive."

"Oh." He's not really sure that matters, if she's alive.

"She must not try to heal it herself. She is suffering mana exhaustion atop it all." Morrigan frowns. "She will recover within a few days, but lyrium won't help for a time if her reserves have gone so low. The state she is in tells me that you, yourself, must not be in good shape, either. Leliana is resting already. Will you not?"

"Are you worried about me?" he asks, trying to put some cheek in it and missing by a mile. "It's fine, Morrigan. I was waiting for her."

She sighs. "There is no accounting for your fool behaviors. Go to her, then."

He does.

She's asleep, and there are bandages wrapped around her from chest to waist. Numerous other wounds have been tended to minimally, as well. There is thick padding beneath the bandages like a layer of gauze, but they're not soaked through with blood, so he's relieved at least a little. Her face is drawn and there's sweat beaded on her forehead and her breathing is shallow but she's *breathing*.

Her hair is still messily tied in the knot she puts it into when she fights. Alistair breathes, and closes his eyes. He can't wake her, but he can do something for her.

Her head is already tipped to the side, so it's easy for him to unwind the leather tie she uses to keep it up. He knows where her comb is in her pack, and he knows how to brush it loose, how to ease the tangles free.

He has to try twice to braid it, and even then it's a bit wonky because he hasn't put it into even sections really, so some knots are thicker than others. But it's approximately how it's supposed to be when she sleeps.

He lays down by her injured side. That's the way her face is turned, but moreover, he wants to be between where she's hurt and the rest of the world. He pulls the blankets over her like he said he would.

Then he abandons himself to his nightmares.

When he wakes to the usual darkspawn, archdemons, and blighted horrors, she's looking back at him.

Her eyes have bruises beneath them and red veins in the whites. They've never been a more beautiful sight.

"You're awake," he says.

"I've bene up for a bit." She waggles the tail end of her braid at him. "Did you do this? It definitely wasn't Leliana."

"Oh. Yeah." He swallows. "*George*, why didn't you tell us you were hurt?"

"No potions, no mana. There was nothing you could have done. And I wasn't turning 'round without those damn ashes."

Alistair might not have as much faith as he thought, because he didn't even think for a second that maybe those ashes could have healed her. Leliana probably would have suggested it if they were too far out to reach camp or if Morrigan's healing had been ineffective. "You still should have told me."

"Would *you* have told *me*?"

He can feel his nose wrinkling. "Fair enough."

She sighs, and it turns into a cough. He moves for a waterskin, and after she's done drinking from it, she says, "is it fair to simply promise we will never again hide life threatening injuries from one another?"

"I won't if you won't," he swears.

“Good.” There’s nothing quite a smile on her face. “Alistair—I’ve never really been so afraid to die before.”

He cups her cheek, stroking his thumb over the smooth curve of it. “I’ve never been so afraid to lose someone.”

“I was...” Her eyes meet his, and they look watery. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen her cry before. “I never told you that I love you.”

He can’t hug her, she’s too badly wounded, but he can lean over her, cupping her face in his hands and pressing his forehead to hers. “I never told you I love you, either.”

“I knew,” she says. “You braided my hair.”

“Well. Yes.” But that’s simple, that’s ordinary. He doesn’t know how to say it. “You were asleep. You don’t like sleeping with it tied back.”

“Yes, but you were injured too, and tired. How long did it take you? You combed it all out, I can tell.”

“I don’t know.”

“You love me.”

“I do.” Maker help him, he does. “You know, when first we met, I told myself I was not allowed to become attached to you, because the darkspawn could kill you or the Joining could kill you. And I think I missed step one.”

“Did you?” she asks. Her voice is weak, not like she’s going to faint, but like she’s going to fall asleep.

“Yeah. Like I dropped that step and fell straight in love with you.”

“It sounds sweeter if you don’t describe it like a tumble down the stairs.”

“Too bad.” He kisses her forehead. She might already be asleep, all he can see is her lashes. Her breathing is even and slow. “That’s how it felt.”

Author's Note:

If you want to see pictures of George, visit my tumblr [@luddlestons](#) and if you want to experience me being a nerd about classics, visit me on Twitter [@luddlestons](#) and if you want to see all that but horny, I invite you to my NSFW twitter [@luddlessmut](#)